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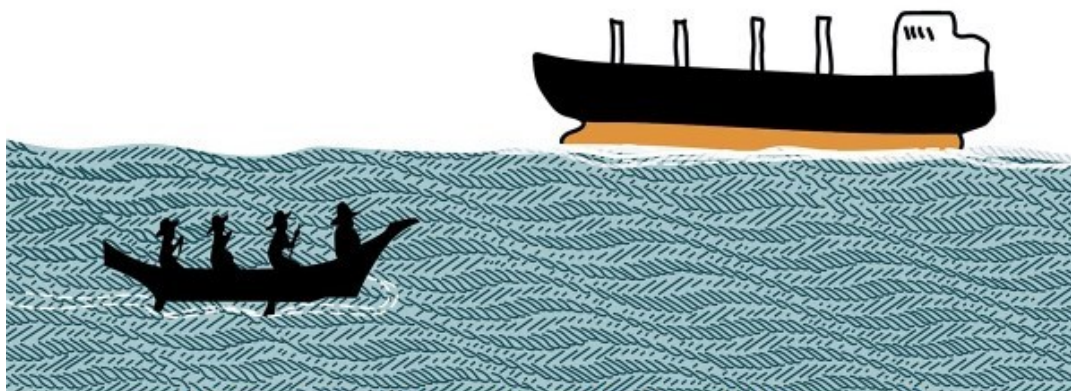
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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Ties That Bind: Finding Meaning in the Making of Sacred Textiles

Janet Pollock



Sakiori Balls, collection of author

I'm honored and happy to be presenting my work for the first time here or anywhere. My first TSA symposium 4 years ago was a pivotal and affirming experience. I found there what I was looking for—models, mentors, and new friends. The wisdom, inspiration and encouragement so generously shared within this community have helped guide me in creating work that begins in contemplation and grows through conversation with cultural artifacts of a spiritual nature.

So, some quick background. My life hasn't unfolded as naturally and organically as a lotus flower, but the life of my work has given form and reason to much of what I have experienced, and to the spiritual, social and family influences I have both enjoyed and endured. I was raised in a small agricultural town in California, my parents having moved from North Dakota just before I was born. My family life was culturally unremarkable and that left me wide open to "influences of choice" as I moved through life. My town had many immigrant groups. And, as a child, I was curious about the unfamiliar foods, rituals, smells, languages—the whole gamut of cultural expression that I witnessed. At home my resourceful mother sewed energetically, transforming humble materials into remarkable garments. She instilled in me a deep appreciation for materials and workmanship. As an adult, I put down roots close to where I was born, in a university town. I practiced Landscape Architecture for more than 3 decades before meeting the rug weaver Martha Stanley, who became my teacher. Through Martha, I began meeting other textile artists and scholars, and eventually learned about TSA.

As a young girl attending Catholic schools and services, I was enchanted with scapulars, cloth relics and with the many mysterious layers of nun's clothing. Years later, I married into a Jewish family and began participating in an entirely new culture of religious observance with sacred cloth and ritual practices that were new to me. Later still, I began a lay Buddhist practice and made ritual textiles for my own use.

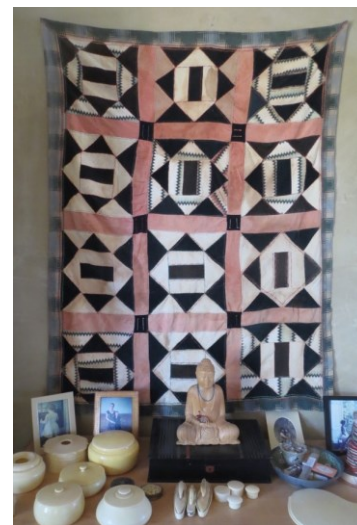


Girlhood Objects, collection of author



Rakusu, collection of author

Along the way, for 40 years now, I re-imagined Sunday worship through regular attendance at our local flea market. That's where I developed the habit of collecting and rescuing discarded and dispersed objects of wonder and beauty, including textiles. For the most part, these objects arrive without annotation. These cast-off pieces of other's lives, cultures and travels each have stories of their own. Sometimes I am able to identify what I am holding and other times I must merely imagine their purpose or origin. All have contributed to the hands-on work I'm sharing today.



Found and Rescued Objects, collection of author

As I was developing my skills as a weaver, I began generating narrative work in the form of textile collage. I wanted to express, through both abstraction and representation, memories, attachments and longings in the language of cloth.



Narrative Wall, collection of author

The exposure to ritual cloth in childhood beckoned me to go beyond my own personal narrative. I am repeatedly drawn to work that accompanies the rituals of living and dying, meditation, devotion and prayer—Each piece of work I’m sharing today grew from what Agnes Martin described as a “moment of inspiration.”¹ Each experience of power, beauty or promise in sacred textiles spawns a need to understand and converse with the work. Balancing the desire for meaning and making while maintaining that conversation is the foundation of my working methodology.

In The Metropolitan Museum’s Egyptian Wing there is a wall of framed fragments of finely woven linen cloth, a number of them with subtle selvedge stripes, in shades of blue, rust and ochre. I wanted to know the significance of this delicate striping so I first approached Egyptian scholars at TSA. That inquiry led me to the Met’s Ratti Center. The striping was likely a simple identification or signature of the weaver. The custom of weaving lengths of linen for the burial ritual intrigued me. Embracing impermanence and death are important parts of my Buddhist practice. I have woven yards of fine linen with a signature selvedge, and can imagine wrapping my mother’s body in cloth when she passes from this life.

¹ Audio, Vija Celmins on Agnes Martin, Dia:Chelsea October 4, 2004.



Self Portrait Metropolitan Museum of Art



Signature Selvedge on Hand-woven Linen, collection of author

I'd started collecting woven textiles well before I learned to weave, including many Japanese Rag Weave Obis, known as *Sakiori Obis*. *Sakiori* weaving has historically utilized torn strips of old cloth to create humble and sturdy garments. I loved the idea of recycling cloth and so, by studying my collection, I learned to weave *Sakiori*. Using heavy sewing thread as the warp, I looked about for suitable weft. My father in law had died a few years before, and I'd inherited his once treasured collection of silk ties. No one else wanted this orphaned collection. A silk tie, strategically cut, yields about 20 yards of weft for weaving. I sampled and sampled, yet did not know what to make of it until I was graced with another moment of inspiration.



Inherited Neckties, collection of author



Neckties as Weft Material, collection of author

On a trip to Amsterdam, I visited the Jewish Historical Museum, finding there an exhibit of Orphan Objects from centuries of Dutch history. Two quotes from the exhibit colored my observations that day. "Seeing leads to reflection, reflection leads to action... The moment just past is extinguished forever, save for the things made by it." This intimate garment, a *tallith* worn close to the skin, touched me deeply and lent purpose to the skills I was practicing.



Tallith katan, Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam JHM 3205



Sakiori Tallith, collection of author



Detail Sakiori, collection of author

At age 15, my father-in-law had to abandon his rabbinical studies when his mother died. During the Second World War, as a member of the Navy's Seabees, he was stationed in occupied Japan and grew to revere its culture and aesthetics. After the war, he became a traveling salesman for men's clothing, including a line of neckties. And in time, he resumed a scholarly pursuit of Jewish studies and a religious practice. He was always most comfortable in formal attire, choosing each day a different combination of jacket, shirt and tie and, at the end of each day, tucking those ties neatly away in drawers made expressly for them. I wove the salvaged neckties of Sam's lifetime into this *sakiori tallith*. His neckties had been given a new life as an expression of his faith and fate. Cutting, winding and weaving each fragile strip of silk cloth was an act of honoring and acknowledging the complexities of a particular life. It was also a personal reconciliation with my father-in-law's initial resistance to his son marrying *me* outside his faith.

The *tallith* was followed with this second honoring piece where I randomly wove 365 silk necktie scraps from Sam's collection into one year's length. And when his widow died a few years ago, she was buried with a small fragment woven from those same scraps to join the two in a symbolic clasp. That fragment, woven of natural materials, was deemed

permissible by those preparing her body for orthodox burial as it would eventually decompose.

This pieced weaving was the final effort in the series, a rhythmic landscape of repeating stripes suggesting a visual field for meditation.



Sakiori Meditation, collection of author

I spent the better part of a year in conversation with another extraordinary sacred textile. I'd found at the flea market a survey book on quilts from around the world.² A few pages in, I was greeted by this tiny image. A patchwork Altar valance, probably 8th century. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever laid eyes on.



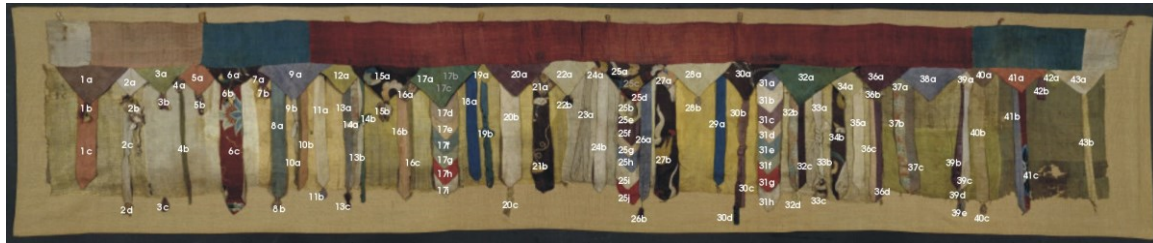
Altar Valance, British Museum MAS 855

Elaine Scarry in her book *On beauty and Being Just* writes: “Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation. Beauty...causes us to gape and suspend all thought”.³ When I first saw the valance, the streamers resembled neckties. The rhythm of streamers and triangles was at once unselfconscious yet balanced. The photo credits led me to the British Museum’s website, where I found photos and descriptions of every piece of the valance, but little discussion of its use or the

² Celia Eddy, *Quilted Planet* (Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2005), 10.

³ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999), 29.

symbolism of the shapes within it. I pored over books on Dunhuang, the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, and writings by and about the archeologist Sir Aurel Stein, who collected this piece during a Silk Road Expedition in 1910. Those writings, along with the visual documentation, made it possible to study this valance in fuller detail.



British Museum Stein Collection Research Photos MAS 855

Scarry continues: “But simultaneously what is beautiful prompts the mind to move chronologically back in the search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation, to move conceptually over, to bring things into relation, and does all this with a kind of urgency as though one’s life depended on it.”⁴

I felt that urgency in the need to make the valance for myself. At first, I was content to attempt a scaled approximation, working with materials at hand. As I continued to wonder about the meaning, the uses and the makers of the valance, I found myself refining each step to mirror what I was seeing, and to render my valance as sympathetically as I was able. It seemed ludicrous to call mine a replica, this piece was 1000 years old, and made of fabrics I would never touch. I settled on portraying, with MY hands and MY skills, the *signature* features of the original valance, a portrait if you will. I scavenged and sourced small bits of silk from my collection and those of friends.

⁴ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 30.



Construction Details of Altar Valance Portrait, collection of author

Then I dyed and over dyed them and fabricated streamers, triangles, small figures and decorations. I acquired new skills in hand work as needed. This process required a dedication to intimate inquiry, where, in the absence of ready answers, I cultivated my own spiritual connections with the resulting work. As Scarry observes, “the benign impulse toward creation results not just in famous paintings but in everyday acts of staring; it also reminds us that the generative object continues, in some sense, to be present in the newly begotten object.”⁵



“Portrait” Altar Valance, collection of author

⁵ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 9.

In revisiting my earlier narrative work, I could see a way to articulate a personal story using the vocabulary I had acquired in making the valance portrait. Buddhist teachings suggest that we each have a few core stories that shape our experience of, and outlook on, the world, and that offer ongoing opportunities for practice. Acknowledging and welcoming difficulty is an integral part of Buddhist practice. If a significant function of devotional textiles is to make offerings for betterment in this life or the next, I would delve into the remnants of a past relationship to make a kind of offering. My father was already gone when I began working on this piece, but many unresolved feelings lingered. I'd hoped that, through this work, I might lighten the burden of feeling ignored, betrayed and abandoned. At the flea market, once again, I found a trove of neckties from the 1950's and 60's, in the somber, subdued hues and textures he would have worn. I saw their potential as ready-made streamers that symbolized my father's *presence*. I just needed to figure out how to represent myself in dialog with him, to articulate my need to be part of a healing conversation. Few fabrics from my own childhood remain. I sourced additional scraps of vintage cotton and silk that spoke to me of remembered clothing and special occasions growing up. The small, stuffed figures represent significant moments, in the life of the sunny, funny, and sometimes sad child that I was. Assembling these patchwork pieces felt like a dance, advancing and retreating, leaning in and pulling back, until I could rest grounded in a sense of worthiness.

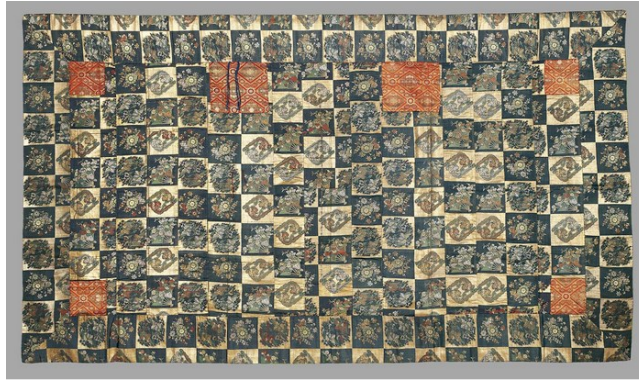


Valance II Detail, collection of author



Valance II, collection of author

Sewing ritual robes and aprons is an embodiment of merit-making practice in Zen Buddhism. An object in a Metropolitan Museum exhibit, ‘Interwoven Globe’ provided a recent Moment of Inspiration for an ongoing series of small studies.⁶ At the Ratti Center, I was able to study several ceremonial *Kesa*, admiring the use of directional layers of patterning to symbolize rice fields. I’d had the firsthand experience of sewing a *rakusu* or apron, as a requirement of becoming ordained as a lay practitioner. I’d enjoyed the quiet, deliberate act of stitching together many, small precise pieces of cloth, each stitch made with intention and focus.



Kesa, Museum of Fine Arts Boston 11.24771



Kesa, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 19.93.10

But these large ceremonial pieces where whole cloth was cut and reassembled, appearing as fractured canvases, were profound and mystifying. There is a subtle disruption in these complex and ordered compositions that I find so beautiful and inviting. I turned to Buddhist literature and sewing manuals as a way to gather and study the rules for making *kesa*. Tomoe Katagiri in the “*Study of the Okesa, Buddha’s Robe*” says “The most common style is made from the long and short square pieces offered by many donors, or it is made from brand new material that is cut into long and short pieces. Cutting a large piece of material is symbolic of using discarded fabric and that to cut a large piece of material into small pieces means to emancipate us from strong attachment. Each row of

⁶ *Kesa* 19.93.111, Interwoven Globe Exhibit, Metropolitan Museum of Art, September 2013.

these *kesa*, is sewn together with two or more long pieces and a short piece. Some rows have a short piece on top and a long piece on the bottom and others have a long piece on the top and a short piece on the bottom. This construction means that Buddha nature is neither big nor small, neither long nor short. A short piece does not always take a higher place on the top, and we cannot judge that the top is more important because it is in a higher position or the bottom is less important because it is in a lower position. Buddha nature really permeates everywhere. What is short is short of itself; what is long is long of itself. There is no difference between a long piece and a short piece.”⁷

Here are some recent studies and works in progress. I am attempting the merit-making practice of assembling miniature *kesa*. Some choices I’ve made have led me to undertake extensive hand stitching on brocades and dense silks. These are painful lessons, but through them I am coming to understand what brings life to my own patterned and stitched endeavors.



Miniature Silk Kesa, collection of author

Lastly, I think about the work that I’ve shared with you today in this way, as both relative and absolute, composed of unique efforts but one body, bound and fueled by encounters with beauty and my search for meaning in making.

⁷ Tomoe Katagiri, *Study of the Okesa, Nyohe-e Buddha’s Robe*, Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, 11.

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